Syria: destroying the past for the future

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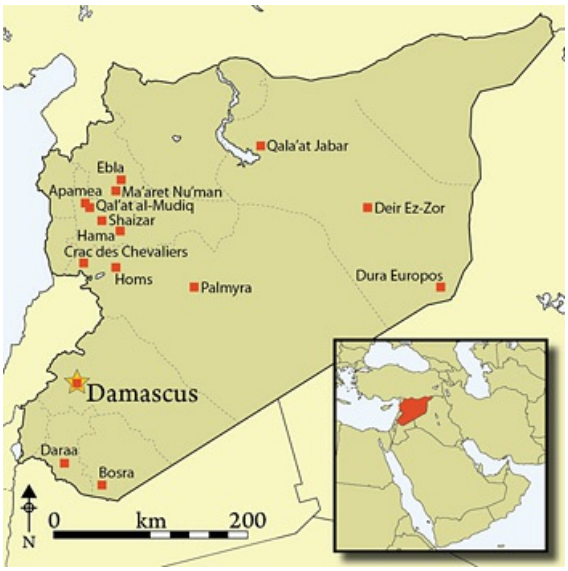


Figure 1. *Map showing location of sites mentioned in the text.*

The archaeology of Syria (Figure1) is well known for its richness and complexity. There are six World Heritage sites, with a further ten on UNESCO's Tentative list, spanning more than 5000 years of human achievement. Here religion and history intertwine: the Old City of Damascus contains the house where Saul is thought to have stayed after converting to Christianity and some of the mosques date back to the time of Mohammed. Many are still in use today, part of a living heritage tradition. However, the current conflict has not spared this cultural heritage, and it may be years before the full extent of the damage is known, if ever. There is little verifiable information: most comes from YouTube videos via a Facebook group, Le patrimoine archéologique syrien en danger (PASD; http://www.facebook.com/Archeologie.syrienne).

It began at Daraa's al-Omari mosque, a centre for protests. The mosque dates to the advent of Islam and remained in use, but was shelled in 2011 and 2012 (Figure 2) (GulfNews 2011; PASD 2012e). Some religious sites have been actively targeted, particularly in Homs (for Christian sites see Mediawerkgroep Syrië 2012; for both see PASD *passim*). Many more sites have been used for sniper positions and cover from return fire, resulting in shrapnel damage and destruction (PASD 2011, 2012a). Time and again at the centre of conflict between empires, many of Syria's ancient defences now find history repeating itself. Protests were held in citadels such as Crac des Chevaliers, a World Heritage site, and in the modern village located in the (predominantly twelfth-century AD) citadel of Qal'at al-Mudiq, which is part of Apamea, a ruined Greco-Roman and Byzantine city on the Tentative list. Both have since been shelled and occupied by soldiers (Cunliffe 2012 and *pers. comm*; PASD 2012d), and the damage to Qal'at al-Mudiq, at least, is extensive (Figure 3).

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Figure 2. *Shelling of the al-Omari mosque in Daraa, 2012 (image courtesy of Le patrimoine archéologique syrien en danger).*



Figure 3. *Shelling at Qal'at al Mudiq, March 2012 (image courtesy of Le patrimoine archéologique syrien en danger).*



Figure 4. *An eighth-century BC Aramaic statue (bottom centre) from the Hama Museum.*

Shelling has been confirmed at the famous Greco-Roman colonnaded street in the city of Apamea, at the World Heritage site of Bosra and in the historic quarters of Hama, Homs and Damascus (PASD in Cunliffe 2012). Other sites are reported to harbour heavy weapon installations and entrenched military emplacements. Extensive fighting took place in the third-millennium BC city of Ebla with apparently heavy damage (Archaeology News Network 2012). The World Heritage site of Palmyra is a popular tourist attraction, famed for its 'magical' desert oasis setting. A resident told Agence France-Presse that troops occupied the citadel overlooking the town and the ruins, and tanks occupied part of the ancient city: "Machine gun fire

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rains down from the citadel at anything that moves in the ruins because they think it is rebels" (GHF 2012).

As security breaks down, the guards and officials of the Directorate General of Antiquities and Museums (DGAM) are less able to protect the heritage. Although looting in Syria carries a harsh 15-year jail sentence, it is an increasing problem. A leaked memo suggested professional gangs were operating in Syria since August 2011 (Bajjaly 2012). In Hama, where an armed blockade prevented staff access to the museum, an eighth-century BC gold Aramaic statue (Figure 4) and antique weaponry were stolen (Zablit 2012). The Museum of al-Ma'aret Nu'man has been attacked several times, and items were taken from Qala'at Jabar Museum in Raqqa province, as well as the Apamea museum. Concerns have been expressed about the museums in Homs and Deir Ez-Zor (Cunliffe 2012). At Crac des Chevaliers and Apamea, looters held site guards at gunpoint (Archaeology News Network 2012). It is estimated that at Apamea the looted area now exceeds that of the excavated area. Drills were used to remove mosaics, and the holes are reported to be 2m deep (Archaeology News Network 2012; Charles Ayoub World Web Portal 2012). Palmyra is also thought to have been heavily looted, allegedly by soldiers. Le patrimoine archéologique syrien believe other locations affected include Shaizar fortress, Tell Hamoukar (an important Bronze Age centre) and most recently Dura Europos (another World Heritage nomination), where the site museum was badly damaged. In April, the DGAM seized 1300 looted items (Shukumaku 2012).



Figure 5. *Car bomb outside the Old City of Damascus by Souk al-Hamidye, a World Heritage site (image ©European Press Agency).*

Despite efforts to highlight the situation, the media rarely report on the destruction. For example, reports located a car bomb in Damascus "near a busy Damascus market and Syria's highest court" (Smith 2012). Photographs show the explosion happened by the Old City (Figure 5), a World Heritage site of outstanding universal value, which passed unremarked.

The media may be silent, but heritage agencies are getting louder. Many organisations, including UNESCO, are calling to protect the sites. As well as a statement of concern, BANEA (British Association of Near Eastern Archaeology) has launched a petition calling for site protection, to be sent to the British Government, UNESCO and ICCROM. Members of BANEA and concerned archaeologists are also trying to keep track of the looting and stolen artefacts through personal contacts in Syria. Le patrimoine archéologique syrien has released several appeals to archaeologists, international organisations and the Syrian people themselves. Their recent appeal (PASD 2012f) said: "Syria's history is your history. Take care to preserve it—its antiquities, museums, historic city quarters, archaeological sites and libraries are yours, everywhere within Syria: they are the cradle of civilisation in all its diversity."

Campaigns also continue for international legislation advised (but not implemented) after the Iraq wars. Meanwhile, others watch for the inevitable sales of Syria's stolen heritage—some to protect it, and some to profit. Inevitably, where conflict threatens peoples' lives and their country, few can spare thoughts for the treasures of the past. It remains to be seen what will be left for the future.

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